

Winter 2007 | Number **48**   
**High School Reform: It's About Time**

**High School Reform: It's About Time**

Anne Nelson

It's no secret that American high schools face significant challenges. The current educational model that was designed to serve the United States in the early 1900s is no longer relevant in preparing students to succeed in today's global economy. Leaders across all fields worry that even students who do complete high school are not adequately prepared for higher education or work success.

Evidence that the traditional high school is long overdue for reform has been mounting for decades. High school graduation rates are dropping. Many students who enter college require remedial courses in basic subjects, and an increasing number of young adults who join the workforce directly out of high school have insufficient reading, writing, and mathematics skills. At the same time, an increasingly complex global economy means that students need critical-thinking skills, technological expertise, and business acumen to succeed. In short, our nation's schools are underperforming. We are graduating—or not graduating—too many young adults who are ill-prepared to enter college or the workforce. This has significant ramifications for the United States' economy, as we are no longer competing against one another within our country so much as on a global scale. Our students must be prepared for success in a global workplace because they are competing against students in other countries that are making robust strides in education.

Some school districts have responded to the demand for better-trained graduates by implementing promising and innovative practices in high school reform. These efforts include changing the standard course of study, the composition of the school day, and the way students are assessed. Specific programs that have produced positive results include smaller schools and career academies. Multifaceted approaches to high school reform include personalized learning experiences, flexibility for students, rigorous curricula, and new models of teacher professional development. In response to these efforts, promotion, attendance, and graduation rates have improved—and, most important, so has students' academic performance.

In this issue of *Infobrief*, we explore the five key components of ASCD's High School Reform Proposal: (1) multiple measures of assessment; (2) personalized learning strategies; (3) flexible use of time and structure; (4) new professional development models for teachers and school leadership; and (5) business and community engagement. Each of these components places the focus of education on the learning goals we want students to achieve, with greater flexibility to allow students and schools to reach those challenging goals in the best way possible.

Schools are successfully implementing and funding these strategies at local levels. To have a significant effect, however, the strategies require consistent implementation at the national level. Given the negative impact of underperforming high schools on U.S. economic prosperity—including the nation's ability to compete globally—it is time to take action consistently, on a national level.

The venerable comprehensive high school—the one-size-fits-all, one-stop diploma shop leading to college, jobs, military service, or marriage—is overdue for reexamination and overhaul. High school dropout rates have reached 30 percent (Barton, 2005). According to the American Diploma Project (2004), nearly one-third of entering college freshmen immediately need to take a remedial English or mathematics course, and more than half take a remedial English or math class before graduating. More than half of the high school graduates who enter college never finish their degrees. In addition, research suggests that those students who go directly to work do not bring with them the basic skills necessary to succeed, leaving employers to foot the bill for remedial work in reading, writing, and math. Workers give their high school preparation programs low marks, as well; they rate “literacy and critical-thinking skills as much more important than job-specific or computer skills”(American Diploma Project, 2004, p. 3).

Proponents of high school reform point to the need for a new type of high school graduate—one who can apply the skills gained in pursuit of a diploma to the foundation for a successful college experience and a successful career. Researchers point to the need for schools to incorporate global awareness and financial, economic, business, and civic literacy into the existing curriculum so they can produce graduates with “21st century skills” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2002, p. 5). Research highlights the importance of assessment as a tool to measure progress but also encourages educational leaders to move beyond one-dimensional standardized testing and develop means to “measure the full range of the students' skills in a timely way” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2002, p. 16).

Interestingly, both students and proponents of reform suggest that increased academic rigor is necessary to improve the quality and relevance of earning a high school diploma. In a recent study of high school dropouts, two-thirds of the dropouts interviewed noted that they would have worked harder if more had been required of them, and 70 percent of these former students were confident that they could have graduated if they had tried (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morison, 2006).

States are responding to demonstrated needs and national requirements for increased rigor by aligning curricula with college admission standards and workplace expectations. Some states are increasing the number of required courses in science, mathematics, English, and foreign languages; eliminating lower-tier diplomas; and requiring all students to complete a college-prep curriculum (Martinez, 2005). Others are providing financial incentives for schools that adopt the advanced placement program by subsidizing the student fees required to take the tests (Martinez, 2005).

In sum, the movement toward reform of the century-old high school model is gaining momentum, with nearly all interested parties—students, teachers, administrators, colleges, businesses, and state and national governments and agencies—supporting or implementing elements of change.

**Promising Strategies**

With consensus building around the need for change, schools across the country are testing numerous promising strategies for high school reform at state and local levels. These strategies include multiple methods of assessment, personalized learning, flexible use of time and structure, new models of professional development for teachers and school leadership, and business and community engagement.

**Multiple Assessments**

Multiple assessments of student achievement are necessary to counteract, or at least balance, the highstakes scenario of measuring student achievement by standardized tests alone. The primary disadvantage of a traditional standardized test is that it measures student achievement through one test or a set of tests taken on one day in one format. The advantage of standardized tests is that they are easily scored and, when administered correctly, can produce estimates of achievement that are comparable across school districts and states. This ease of comparison can help in assessing local and national trends. For that reason, proponents of assessment reform do not suggest eliminating these tests (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2002).

Rather, schools can use multiple measures of assessment, such as advanced placement tests and end-of-course exams, which are taken while a subject is still fresh in a student's mind, in concert with standardized tests. The ability to make effective oral arguments is important to employers and colleges, and high schools can teach and test this skill outside the boundaries of standardized testing (American Diploma Project, 2004). Performance-based assessments—including independent projects; portfolios of work such as art and writing; and demonstrations of a wide range of skills, such as debating, dance, science, or computer applications—can also provide a broader view of a student's achievements. Although some are concerned that these types of measures will lack uniformity nationwide, there is merit to formally including them to complement standardized tests. This would allow for individuality in much the same way that essay components of standardized tests have done for many years.

Standardized tests may also be helpful when used as tools for planning and decision making prior to the end of the student's career. For example, in Tennessee, schools use precursors to the ACT test to help predict ACT scores. These tests help focus students on areas of weakness two or three years prior to taking the ACT exam. Doing so helps students bring their comprehensive scores up to 21 or higher, making them eligible for full tuition at a state college or university (B. Kennedy, personal interview, November 17, 2006). Multiple measures of assessment can also serve as useful diagnostic measurements to improve teaching and learning.

**Personalized Learning**

While multiple assessments allow us to gather a variety of data about the success of our students, it's just as important to recognize students' unique learning needs. Personalized learning is a successful strategy for tailoring instruction to differing needs. Promising personalized learning practices currently in place throughout the country include career-focused tracks or career academies, student-driven action plans, individual graduation plans that blend academics and other learning experiences, and more rigorous coursework and personalized daily schedules for struggling students (Education Trust, 2005). Smaller schools, which contribute to personalized learning, are becoming more widely accepted, replacing larger high schools where feasible and, studies suggest, improving student achievement (Wasley et al., 2000).

Individualization of learning helps counteract the one-size-fits-all mentality of the traditional high school and allows students to tailor their learning to future plans and individual needs. Studies have shown that combining academic rigor with career or technical learning (provided through the school), work-based learning (provided through a business in the community), and specific guidance or mentoring designed to help the student move toward postsecondary goals not only improves graduation rates but also helps boost scores in reading, mathematics, and science (Aratani, 2006; Bottoms, 2003).These outcomes will help all graduates, whether they go on to college or report directly to work. South Carolina recently passed a law that requires schools to develop “career-inclusive individual education plans” for 8th graders and implement career planning for 6th and 7th graders (Richard, 2005, p. 2).High schools in the state must begin offering courses from 16 approved career clusters, which include education, communications, hospitality, business, and information technology. The law, which will be fully implemented by 2011, is intended to help South Carolina's high schools “prepare a new kind of workforce, ready for jobs in technology and research”(Richard, 2005).

Over the past 30 years, more than 1,500 schools nationwide have taken this idea further, implementing career academies, which promote supportive and individualized learning. These “schools within schools” enroll a subset of each grade, typically 30–60 students, in a core curriculum focused around a particular career (e.g., business, health, information technology). Students in a career academy take classes together each year and remain with the same core of teachers, while enhancing their learning with career-focused internships, field trips, and related activities outside of the classroom. Career academies have been shown to reduce dropout rates, improve attendance, improve focus on academic courses, and increase students' likelihood of graduating on time (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

Another important component of personalized learning is a defined, one-on-one relationship between each student and an adult in the school who is responsible for keeping in frequent contact with the student on both a formal and informal basis. Bridgeland and coauthors cite this relationship as one element that dropouts recommended to help keep other students in school (2006). An earlier *Infobrief* (Nelson, 2006) profiled the turnaround plan for San Diego's Herbert Hoover High School, which included an initiative called the “Challenge 10.” This strategy enabled the school to stretch the reach of the faculty by having each teacher choose 10 students to mentor and guide—giving 1,400 students access to an adult focused on following their school careers, at no extra cost to the school. Klem and Connell (2004) demonstrated that focused teacher support promotes student engagement, leading to higher levels of attendance, test scores, and high school completion rates.

Schools have creatively addressed concerns about cost and staff time to implement such programs by using scheduled planning periods for teacher and counselor training or using available budget money to hire a dedicated “change coach”—someone to do the legwork on reform initiatives if teacher and counselor time cannot be freed up (Kennedy, 2006).

**Flexibility**

Flexible use of time and structure is another promising practice, says Bill Kennedy of the Public Education Foundation's Schools for a New Society (see p. 6). Schools can focus on using activities outside the classroom—including internships, online courses, independent study, and career and technical education—to help students meet graduation requirements. Schools can also vary the number of hours, days, or years necessary to complete high school. For example, some students are better served by finishing school in three years or mixing college courses with high school courses toward the end of their schooling. For students who are struggling, schools can offer “credit recovery” options or allow extra time to complete or revisit difficult components of a course—offering them flexibility instead of failure (Education Trust, 2005; Kennedy, 2006; Quint, 2006). Districts can address concerns about consistency of such programs across schools by ensuring that all students complete a measurable, designated core curriculum. Schools can allow students extra time to complete core classes, if necessary; students could be on track with, ahead of, or behind their cohort. Administrators can use planning or professional development time already in the calendar to develop and monitor these initiatives.

**New Professional Development Models**

Professional development for teachers and school leadership is an essential component of high school reform. Nearly all models have moved away from sending teachers to conferences or single-day forums. Research demonstrates that “sustained and intensive” professional development, activities focused on academic subject matter and hands-on learning, and “collective participation of teachers from the same school, grade or subject” are more likely to have a lasting and positive impact on teachers' classroom performance than are other models (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001, pp. 935–936). Promising practices include developing peer-to-peer networks and mentoring programs, focusing on relevant research in the education field and the means to apply it locally, building on lessons learned locally and nationally, and ensuring that teachers and school leaders have access to coursework for continuing education that is targeted and relevant (Kennedy, 2006; Martinez, 2005). The role of professional development as a tool to energize, attract, and keep quality teachers and administrators is too powerful to ignore.

To address concerns about funding, many school systems have simply reapplied money designated for travel and conference fees under the old model to other techniques that show great potential. Again, use of existing meetings and teacher workdays can free up the time necessary for professional development. In many cases, administrators can designate one meeting per month for these purposes. It is more important for professional development to be focused and ongoing than for it to involve a huge investment of time at any point in a teacher's or an administrator's career (Garet et al., 2001; Kennedy, 2006).

**Engaging the Local Community**

Finally, business and community engagement is emerging as a powerful strategy for realigning and reconnecting high schools to the world beyond. Numerous promising models exist; for example, community schools involve the students, families, and community members by offering programs of interest on campus before, during, and after school hours. Business-school partnerships offer learning opportunities for students and an enthusiastic parttime labor force for businesses. With the new model of career and technical education in high schools, local businesses that support students may look forward to their return as skilled and experienced full-time employees after graduation from high school or college. Schools, in turn, benefit from the expertise and involvement of local business leaders, who can serve as role models, mentors, and advisors to students. Although research on outcomes of school-community programs is limited, one study of career academies found that the experience had a significant positive impact on the earnings of young men who attended them (Quint, 2006).

As with other reform programs that show great potential, business and community education comes with a price tag in terms of staff and preparation time. It also requires an investment in nurturing and managing appropriate school-business partnerships and programs. In this case, however, the required planning time can be split among interested community members, if the school pursues local funding. Business and community engagement is not easily standardized at the state or national level; however, it offers a model that reflects the unique character of each community and its schools.

**A Brighter Future**

Schools and communities nationwide are reacting to rising dropout rates and a disconnect between the relevance of the high school diploma, the requirements of the workforce, and the demands of college. Many high schools and districts are demonstrating promising reform practices at local and state levels, and it's time for national action along the same lines. Practices such as multiple assessments, personalized learning, flexible use of time and structure, professional development for teachers and school leadership, and business and community engagement must be central elements of any comprehensive approach to high school reform.

|  |
| --- |
| **High School Reform: A Case Study**  What does high school reform look like in practice? Hamilton County, Tenn., has been approaching the problem from a number of angles. For years, the county had used the traditional comprehensive high school model to churn out graduates with one of two types of credentials—a college-prep diploma or a vocational education diploma. Educational leaders in the state recognized that this model was no longer preparing students for success in either work or postsecondary education. So, with help from planning and implementation grants from the Carnegie Foundation, school leaders began creating a new model of high school education.  The first thing leaders reformed was the diploma. All students now prepare to graduate with a single-path diploma; the district eliminated the vocational education diploma, supporting the goal that students exiting high school would need the same skill sets to succeed in work as in postsecondary training or education. Next, to address the problem of students getting lost in their large, comprehensive high schools, Hamilton County set four goals:   * Personalizing the high school experience for students. * Providing flexibility for students—moving away from the traditional rigidity of program and schedule. * Implementing rigorous, relevant, and engaging curricula—a boon for students and teachers alike. * Building a professional learning community for teachers and administrators.   A one-size-fits-all reform initiative clearly would not work for this diverse county. Its schools range from urban to rural and small (200 students) to large (1,900 students) and include K–12, 6–12, and 9–12 formats. “It's not a topdown reform,” says Bill Kennedy, director of Schools for a New Society, a partner with Hamilton County in the effort. “We are learning together and making decisions that are good for our schools and our students.”  For the effort to be successful, one of the first things the county had to do was dispel the longstanding, pervasive competitiveness between its high schools in everything from sports to merit scholarships to ACT scores. Over the past four years, faculty in Hamilton County have transformed the academic competitiveness into a strong collaboration that has fostered a learning community and enhanced professional development and cross-school problem solving. School administrators meet monthly for a half day to discuss current research and how to make it work in their schools. Using structured protocols and processes to review the literature (most recently, reform work in adolescent literacy), they then take their work back to their schools and guide teachers through the same type of forum. Gone are the days of professional development consisting only of going away to a conference—the focus here is on relevancy and immediate application to the school environment.  Career academies have been one of the other foundations of the countywide reform effort. Red Bank High School, with strong support from the community, has developed career academies in health and teaching. The community has provided critical funding, internship slots, and business links to make the academies successful. Red Bank's teaching academy was recently named the 2006 National Career Academy of the Year by the National Career Academy Coalition.  Though it's still early in the process, the reform efforts are beginning to pay off. Armed with research that shows that students who fail to complete 9th grade within 12 months are the least likely to graduate, the county has placed a strong emphasis on supporting the transition from 8th to 9th grade to prepare students for a successful 9th grade year. The initial results are promising—the percentage of students completing the move from 9th to 10th grade in one year rose from 81.2 percent in 2004 to 89.1 percent in 2006. Initial results also show improvement in graduation and attendance rates, as well as in scores on the English and math Gateway Tests (Hamilton County Department of Education, 2005).  With parents and students, counselors also look for movement on Tennessee's Gateway Tests (Algebra I, English 10, and Biology) from “proficient” to “advanced” and review ACT scores along with “predictor” tests taken in 8th and 10th grades. Tennessee has aligned its state standards with the ACT, and students achieving a composite score of 21 can attend a state school with a full-tuition Tennessee HOPE Scholarship. These metrics—competency at the transition to high school and growth in scores along the way—will provide the ultimate payoff: improved graduation rates and, more importantly, improved competency among graduates for whatever path they choose to take.  *For more information on ASCD's High School Reform Proposal, please visit*[*www.ascd.org/actioncenter*](http://www.ascd.org/actioncenter)*or contact Dan Fuller, ASCD's public policy director, at*[*dfuller@ascd.org*](mailto:dfuller@ascd.org). |

**References**

American Diploma Project. (2004). *Ready or not: Creating a high school diploma that counts*. Retrieved November 20, 2006, from [www.achieve.org/files/ADPreport\_7.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/ADPreport_7.pdf)

Aratani, L. (2006, March 12). Vo-tech as a door to college. *The Washington Post*, p. C11. Retrieved November 24, 2006, from [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/11/AR2006031101158.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/11/AR2006031101158.html)

Barton, P. (2005, February).*One-third of a nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. Retrieved November 20, 2006, from [www.ets.org/Media/onethird.pdf](http://www.ets.org/Media/onethird.pdf)

Bottoms, G. (2003). *Closing the achievement gap: A “high schools that work” design for challenged schools.* Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.

Bridgeland, J., DiJulio, J., & Morison,K. B. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises, LLC. Retrieved December 18, 2006, from [www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf](http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/downloads/ed/TheSilentEpidemic3-06FINAL.pdf)

Education Trust. (2005,November).*Gaining traction, gaining ground: How some high schools accelerate learning for struggling students*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved December 18, 2006, from [www2.edtrust.org/NR /rdonlyres/6226B581-83C3-4447-9CE7-31C5694B9EF6/0/GainingTractionGainingGround.pdf](http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/6226B581-83C3-4447-9CE7-31C5694B9EF6/0/GainingTractionGainingGround.pdf)

Garet, M. S., Porter, A.C., Desimone, L., Birman, B. F., & Yoon, K. S. (2001).What makes professional development effective? Results from a national sample of teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, *38*(4), 915–945.

Hamilton County Department of Education. (2005). *Fact sheet: Hamilton County Schools system report card 2005*. Retrieved December 7, 2006, from [www.hcde.org/reports/media/pdfs/report-card05/PR110205-b.pdf](http://www.hcde.org/reports/media/pdfs/report-card05/PR110205-b.pdf)

Kemple, J. J., & Snipes, J.C. (2000). *Career academies: Impacts on students' engagement and performance in high school*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.

Klem, A.M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health, 74*(7), 262–263.

Martinez, M. (2005).Advancing high school reform in the states: Policies and programs. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Nelson, A. (2006, Summer). Closing the gap: Keeping students in school. *Infobrief* (46), 1–8.

Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2002). *Learning for the 21st century*. Retrieved November 20, 2006, from [www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com\_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=42](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=42)

Quint, J. (2006, May). *Meeting five critical challenges of high school reform: Lessons from research on three reform models*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.

Richard, A. (2005). South Carolina launches career-preparation initiative. *Education Week, 25*(13), 23.

Wasley, P.A., Fine, M., Gladden, M., Holland, N. E., King, S. P., Mosak, E., & Powell, L.C. (2000). *Small schools: great strides*. Retrieved November 24, 2006, from [www.bankstreet.edu/gems/publications/smallschools.pdf](http://www.bankstreet.edu/gems/publications/smallschools.pdf)

**Anne Nelson** is an education studies writer for ICF Caliber.

Copyright © 2007 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development